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PRESS RELEASE

From barangay to Congress: USAID assists a young leader's journey towards effective public service

Carmen, North Cotabato - For Ombra Acoy, becoming a leader was as much a matter of destiny as ambition. At twenty-seven, he became the youngest barangay captain to serve in Kitulaan, Carmen in the province of North Cotabato. Early last year, he spent four months in the House of Representatives as a member of a select group of 41 young professionals as part of a USAID-financed program that exposed participants to national policy making and good governance.

"I never expected these things to happen, for I do not even come from a noble family with a royal blood lineage," says Acoy. In Muslim Mindanao, members of royal families traditionally become involved in politics because of their established names and family histories.

Although there is no royal blood running in his veins, Acoy grew up surrounded by leaders of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), an Islamic separatist group that waged war for more than two decades with the Philippine Government.

His late father, a commander of the Sebangon Kutawato (North Cotabato) State Revolutionary Committee assigned to him the daunting task of organizing a dissident group in their area. This early exposure to the traditional leaders of his community prepared him well for the life he is now leading.

"Most of what I remember was the hard life. I saw people coming and going, and some of them I never saw again. At that age, I remember asking if there was more to life than that," says Acoy, whose childhood was marred by the realities of war and underdevelopment. "My eagerness to become a leader actually stems from that recollection, even until now," he adds.

At the tender age of 17, his career as a leader began when, barely out of high school, he was elected as the Sangguniang Kabataan Chairperson of his village. Not surprisingly, two years after that he became a Barangay Councilor, a position he held for eight years.

His election as a Barangay Councilor allowed him to pursue his college degree without financial concerns, following the ratification of the local government code that allows barangay leaders to continue their studies in state-run universities and colleges at no cost.

Acoy had to juggle his duties as a student with those of a barangay councilor for four years, until he finished his degree in Secondary Education at the University of Southern Mindanao.



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Life after the war

“After graduation, I was asked by my elders to run for the barangay chairmanship position, because they said I now had something to contribute,” Acoy says.

He won the election easily. When his father died, the elders also elected him to the Board of Directors of the Moro United Multi-Purpose Cooperative, which his father had helped to organize.

“Kitulaan is largely a corn-producing area. We have a cooperative formed after the signing of the GRP-MNLF peace agreement in 1996, which qualified us to receive development aid such as inputs for corn production, a solar dryer, and a warehouse,” Acoy explains.

The USAID-funded program for Livelihood Enhancement and Peace (LEAP) provided these benefits to 160 former combatants in the village, to assist them in adapting to productive civilian lives after the war. Corn production has sustained the villagers’ livelihood ever since.

In 2002, shortly after his assumption of the barangay seat, USAID’s Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program provided additional assistance by helping the group of former combatants to diversify their crops to include higher value commodities.

Under Acoy’s leadership, the barangay, in partnership with the cooperative, chose two commodities. One group ventured into cardaba banana production, and the other established its own mango plantations.

To date, the group that chose cardaba banana production has acquired almost five hectares of production area and has harvested 34 tons of crops with a total value of P131, 580. Meanwhile, the mango production group has planted almost 32 hectares of mango trees, some of which are ready for harvest this April.

Stepping up to Congress

Because of this intensive experience in local governance, a GEM Program technician advised Acoy to apply to the USAID-funded Congressional Internship Program for Young Muslim Leaders (CIPYML).

Initiated by Speaker Jose de Venecia, and supported by the Mindanao State University, CIPYML is designed to provide promising young individuals from the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao and other conflict-affected areas in Mindanao with the chance to observe and participate in the process of democratic governance and to acquire experience in legislation and policy formulation.

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To date, 71 interns have “graduated” from the program, which provides internship experiences to 50 young professionals a year. Program graduates are part of a growing nucleus of trained, effective leaders who are committed to the continued development of democratic institutions in Mindanao.

“When I went to Congress, I only had with me my barangay experience. But the skills I learned in the training program have been helpful in my work as a barangay captain,” Acoy declares.

The young leader also acquired skills and knowledge from specially-designed training sessions on policy development, policy analysis and advocacy, and project planning and management.

“I know now what it takes to develop a city or a barangay. It’s not just solving quarrels and problems as they go by, it’s careful planning, wise policies and transparent governance,” Acoy states confidently.

During the young barangay captain’s four-month stint at the House of Representatives, he worked with special committees and sub committees and selected members of Congress, and was able to help draft government policies.

“I focused on the role of transparent governance at the barangay level, which was really what I needed. Upon her request, I also had a chance to work with my province’s own Congresswoman Lala Taliño-Santos, in the Committee on Public Information,” Acoy shares.

Bringing expertise to the grassroots

Armed with more knowledge on policy formulation, he went back to his village and immediately proceeded to develop barangay ordinances that helped solve some of its perennial problems.

Farmers in Carmen have traditionally undertaken corn shelling and drying on the Sayre National Highway because existing warehouses and solar dryers cannot accommodate the production volume. As a result, they leave cobs along the roadway, which pose hazards to both motorists and villagers.

To avoid accidents, he directed owners of corn shelling equipment to stop corn shelling activities along the highway and set fines to those who violated the rule. This new ordinance forced the corn shellers to ignore the sacks of corn that farmers usually leave along the highway.

“I was confident that they would see the benefit of following the ordinance because it’s for their own good. And how soon they did,” Acoy explains.



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He also banned all illegal fishing activities in surrounding creeks, which are connected to the Rio Grande de Mindanao, the province's major source of fish and other freshwater resources. He also prohibited farmers from repeating the slash and burn farming practices that have partly destroyed Carmen's watershed.

Last month, Acoy and his barangay councilors submitted their barangay development plan to the provincial office. One of the major projects he specified was the urgent restoration of their water system that collapsed two years ago. More than 100 families in his village do not have access to potable water since he closed their sole water system due to the health risks it posed. He provided instead, jetmatic pumps as temporary sources of water.

"Water is man's basic need. Having it shouldn't be a cause for anxiety. I was only able to provide six pumps for more than 100 households, which is really insufficient. I have to find a way to fix our water system as soon as possible," Acoy states.

The barangay development plan also outlined the possible construction of a new barangay hall because the former hall is now being used as a village madrasah.

"But a new barangay hall can wait. What's really important is water. That's my number one priority now," he adds. In the meantime, he drives his motorcycle around the barangay to conduct consultations with his people.

"Like my father, I do not dream of becoming a huge politician. My mission in life is to serve my people and hopefully make a difference to their lives," states Acoy, whose humility marks him as a true leader. **(GEM Program)**